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THE JARGON OF MASTER FRAN-
ÇOIS VILLON

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THE JARGON OF MASTER FRAN-
ÇOIS VILLON, CLERK OF PARIS
A.D. MCCCCLII. & BEING SEVEN
BALLADS FROM THE THIEVES'
ARGOT OF THE XVth CENTURY

Foreword



Paris during the middle of the XVth Century: France harassed by both English and Burgundians; passing through one of the most sombre and painful periods in all her history: hunger, squalor, famine, and misery present among the lower classes; ignorance, wretchedness, superstition, and unbelief rife; the city and countryside overrun by those whose gain is honest men's loss,—by thieves and swindlers, unfrocked priests of evil lives and frocked ones of but little better; by gamblers, false coiners, and cheats; by wandering players of miracles, farces, and mysteries; by robbers, beggars, and mendicants, up to every form of trick and ruse,—“savants en joncherie et jonglerie”; the age of cheating and cheats, of



tricks and tricksters; and the whole kingdom alive with men of the worst description, whose only fear was that of the Grand Provost and the ever-present gibbet. Such was the France of Master François Villon, Clerk of Paris in the year of Our Lord, 1452, and such his companions.

Little may be known of Villon's association with the Coquillards or "Brothers of the Cockle-shell," a band of robbers and thieves of all sorts and conditions, whose operations during that epoch were quite extensive over the centre of France. But it is known that the Poet was of their number at one time, and that he was a close associate of René de Montigny and of one Collin des Cayeux or l'Ecollier, and assisted in several of their exploits.

The seven Ballads in the Jargon or the Thieves' Argot of that period, which are herewith set forth, appear to be advice and warning—Sermons, they have been called—to his companions, the Brothers of "La Coquille," and they are supposed to have been written about the year 1461. The theme of the "Hangman's noose" and of the "Yawning prison" seems to have been

ever foremost in Villon's mind, and from these ideas he was never able to disassociate himself. Nor is this so strange, since the Archers of the Guard and the rack and gallows played a most if not the most important part in the daily life of the XVth Century Parisian, and Villon himself was acquainted with them only too well.

We are told that there were nineteen gibbets, in and around Paris, in the time of Louis XI and that the populace went "en fête" to all the public executions, chanting songs in ballad form and enjoying themselves to the uttermost. For our Poet these gibbets and gaunt Montfalcon appear to have had a special fascination and likewise horror, he having escaped the hangman's clutches on two different occasions.

Born in 1431 of humble parentage and brought up in Paris by his god-father, the good Canon of St. Benoît; a tempestuous career at the University, debauch and repentance, ambition and despair; Master of Arts in 1452, at the same time Master of Knavery and also of lyric verse in the ballad form; the wonderful two-sided character of the man, a man who could turn

from the coarsest jest in verse to write the beautiful "Prayer for his mother to Notre Dame"; the murder of the priest in 1455 followed by his flight from Paris; his probable sojourn in the Provinces with the Coquillards; then the robbery of the College of Navarre; his imprisonment and sentence at Meung-sur-Loire and his pardon by Louis XIth upon that monarch's accession to the Throne; again implicated in a murder in Paris; torture, sentence to death, and his appeal, followed by a second pardon and by banishment,—such a person was well fitted to write a warning word to his companions.

Every trade, profession, and society has had, more or less, in all periods, many expressions or even a complete language of its own. In the Middle Ages we find the Mendicants organized into guilds, in the same manner as were the different trades, each with its language. So we are told it was with certain bands of robbers, thieves, and cut-purses, as the Coquillards, whose language was the Jargon.

According to M. Auguste Vitu, the word "jargon" is of very ancient French origin, and signifies "an unintelligible language."

Vitu gives its derivation as from the word "jars," meaning a "gander," and from the verb "jargonner," "to cackle"; the "jargon" being quite as impossible to understand as is the "cackling" of geese.

The Court records of that time, of the trials of certain members of the Band of "La Coquille," and notably that of one "Dimanche-le-Loup," the leader of the Band, in 1455 at Dijon, have somewhat helped in giving an insight into the activities of Villon's companions and also have helped in serving as a key to a great many of the words of the Jargon. It is said, however, by several of the authorities upon the Jargon of Villon that it is probable that the language employed in these seven Ballads was not generally used among the "gueux" of that period, but was known only to the friends of the Coquillards, to whom these Ballads were addressed.

The first six of the Ballads in Jargon have been published in more than thirty of the editions of Villon's complete works, but M. Auguste Longnon, in his edition of 1892, has accepted, and has added to the above-mentioned six, the IVth acrostical

Ballad, which appears among the five unedited Ballads in Jargon in the Stockholm MS. of Villon. I have followed the text of M. Longnon in this translation.

In this translation into English verse of the Jargon of Villon, or in this attempt at a translation (for attempt it must be called, since up to the present time no one has been able to find a definite meaning for a great many of the words and expressions in Jargon and many of them may only be come at by surmise), I have tried rather to arrive at the true spirit of Villon, than to quibble over the vague and oftentimes forever lost meaning of a word, and have endeavoured to preserve that crisply rounded turn of refrain and quick pulse-beat of the original, as well as the ever-prevailing touch of grim humour, keeping as close as possible to the text, but in a number of places giving a very free translation of the supposed meaning, and in several cases sacrificing the very hazy context for the better rendering into English verse.

For the actual work of the translation, I have used as a base the most excellent text of M. Longnon's edition of 1892, as I

have said before, and have also employed to a large extent M. Auguste Vitu's work, "Le Jargon du XV^e Siècle," 1884; M. Lazare Laineau's "L'Argot Ancien" (1455-1850), 1907; "Le Jargon et Jobelin de François Villon," of M. Lucien Schone; and also Pierre d'Alheim's "Le Jargon Jobelin de Maître François Villon," 1892.

I have also consulted "La Vie de François Villon," by M. Gaston Paris; M. M. Schwob's "Le Petit et le Grand Testament, et les cinq Ballades en Jargon," published 1905; M. Marthold's "Le Jargon de François Villon," 1909; and "Dictionnaire de l'Ancienne Langue Française, du IX^e au XV^e Siècle," by Godefroy, as well as several of the editions of Villon's complete works, a number of dictionaries of XVth Century French, which I have found in the Bibliothèque Nationale and Bibliothèque Mazarin and at the Bibliothèque Royale in Bruxelles; and the Stockholm MS. of Villon in the Royal Library at Stockholm.

I have not based my rendering of the Jargon of Villon into English upon any of the translations of these Ballads into Modern French, as most of my work upon them

was done prior to my knowledge that such translations had appeared in print, but I have since consulted one or two of them and have made profitable use of these estimable studies in arriving at the meaning of a line or a word when I had almost lost all hope of penetrating some of the mystery of the language of the Coquillards.

Jordan Herbert Stabler

THE JARGON OF MASTER FRAN-
ÇOIS VILLON



Ballad I.



T Paris stands the
Gallows tree,
Where hang the
thieves in sad array;
The Archers failed to
set them free,

Last night carouse and hanged to-day;
But let me from the Dungeons fly—
For there, the Brothers swing on high—
Let me away before too late,
For ear-cropped Cut-throats, it's no use
To take to flight, they're marked, just wait—
Beware, Beware the Hangman's noose.

I'm off while still the chance I see,
For I'll not stay to play the fool;
The fields are wide, there I walk free,
In all the Towns the Gallows rule.
The Scaffold creaks, the Rope is tight,
Those hanging there are limp and white.
Seize those who spy upon our Band;
Make them afraid their tongues to loose:
The Prisons yawn, hold not your hand—
Beware, Beware the Hangman's noose.

Hide under ground whate'er ye take,
For fear of Dungeons bitter cold;
On beds of straw ye'll stay awake,
Within those walls grown dank with mould.
Best take to flight and disappear,
The Grand Provost is ever near.
Take care, ye Dreamers, what ye say;
Take care, ye Plotters, watch your ruse;
When Burghers must be made to pay—
Beware, Beware the Hangman's noose.

Envoi

Prince Froart of the Little Dice,
Not all ye rob will stand abuse;
Take care that ye may not be caught—
Beware, Beware the Hangman's noose.

Ballad II.



O Brothers
of
the Cockle-shell—

At fair Ruel not
long ago,

I sung to you a warning lay;
I spoke to you in whispers low,
And counselled that ye'd best away,
Or die as Collin d'Escailier,
Whose fear Confession did provoke
To plead for life in all dismay—
His neck the villain Hangman broke.

Now fend yourselves with good disguise,
And shun the Temple's yawning gate;
Take care in fleeing to be wise,
Nor change your garments yet too late;
For poor Montigny met his fate,
Betrayed to death by cap and cloak,
And trembling did the end await—
His neck the villain Hangman broke.

Tricksters versed in all your trade,
Play not your game without great care;
By careful plans are profits made,
But if too much ye ever dare—
The gag indeed is sorry fare,
And rack and wheel in truth no joke:
Our Brother's bones were soon picked bare—
Whose neck the villain Hangman broke.

Envoi

Prince, long ago at fair Ruel,
Great pity you did not evoke,
You were not worth a farthing bit—
Whose neck the villain Hangman broke.

Ballad III.



Companions, ye who
have your haunts,
In taverns dark and
inns quite small,
And in the night
supply your wants
By robbing Burghers, Nobles, all—
Your means are swift, but yet are few,
Your prey is robbed without a cry—
Their hard-earned money comes to you;
They make no sound or else they die.
But sometimes naught is ever found,
And tho' ye rob ye miss the prize;
Their gold is buried under ground
By those ye rob who are too wise.

Ye play at dice, ye cast a main,
All cunning now is in your throw;
Ye lose oftentimes for better gain,
The dice cups rattle to and fro;
Ye shake, in silence then ye hear
The click of dice against the board;
The Fortune of the dice is near—
A Two or Three? Ye lose your hoard.

Now these gay blades with whom ye play,
To whom good fortune often flies,
Ye cannot win from them each day,
Those whom ye rob are oft too wise.

And now for this, Beware, Beware,
Companions, Robbers, Thieves, and all,
And for the trysting place take care,
Where rests the band within your call.
Who seeks to rob by acts too bold
Will not succeed as well as he
Who lays his plans with care, I'm told,
To trick the ones less wise than he;
But ofttimes they are tricksters too,
And archers also wear disguise,
And ye are caught and hung, 't is true,
By those ye rob who are too wise.

Envoi

Prince, Beware, hard times come fast,
Take all that comes before your eyes;
Be not imprisoned at the last
By those ye rob who are too wise.

Ballad IV.



Ye dicers skilled
in every play,
To ease gay gallants
of their gold,
Use all the cunning
that ye may,

Ye robbers are a people bold.
Let none escape from out the fold
As Berart did; 't is then too late.
My brother, death is ever cold—
Beware the Prison's yawning gate.

If ye are caught, try to escape;
The Archers love you none too dear.
Your stolen garments, sword and cape,
Good Master Hangman gets, I fear;
His deadly noose is ever near,
And standing ye will meet your fate,
For ye will find but little cheer
Within the Prison's yawning gate.

The Brothers whom the Archers caught
Will soon be brought to know their end;
This time their cunning counts for naught.
Whene'er the racks their bodies rend
The screw and wheel their help will lend;
Your time is next, My Brother, wait;
You too will know the Hangman's friend
Before you leave the Prison's gate.

Envoi

Good Prince of Gamesters, take advice,
Teach all your cunning to your mates,
And if you play with loaded dice,
Beware the Prison's yawning gates.

Ballad V.



YE Tricksters for
your Tricks renowned,
Choose well the
game ye are to play,
Lest in the prisons
ye 'll be found,
For there the penalty ye pay—
Stay not too long, hie ye away,
'T is far too dangerous in this place;
It's very snug, I've heard them say,
Within the Hangman's strong embrace.

Hide well from sight, far under ground,
All ye have robbed without delay,
Or by the Archers ye 'll be bound.
Best cheat the gallows of their prey—
Get rid of Berart, when ye may,
And all his kind, who are as base,
Or ye may fall this very day
Within the Hangman's strong embrace.

And while the Archers make their round,
Suspitions ye had best allay;
In Paris Robbers' foes abound,
And on the rack their bodies flay—
These warning words ye need obey,
For you will meet with little grace;
Those that escape are few, they say,
From out the Hangman's strong embrace.

Envoi

Good Prince of Robbers, sleeping sound,
Remember death comes all apace;
With friends you 'd best yourself surround,
For fear the Hangman's strong embrace.

Ballad VI.



Ompanions of our
band, care-free,
Rob ye for naught
except for gold.
Seek only those
who're weak, ye see;

Let those go by who seem too bold;
And when ye take a purse or so,
Nor backwards ever throw a glance:
Beware the Law where'er ye go,
Which makes you on the Gallows dance.

And keep your features in disguise,
Lest ye yourselves be brought to grief,
And let none take you by surprise—
The torture's ready for the thief.
But take the silver, leave the rest,
And at no purses look askance;
To have some money, yes, 't is best,
Before ye on the Gallows dance.

Spread far and wide where'er ye may
What money false ye make or find;
Change it for good—be swift, I say—
And keep this warning in your mind—
Who is too bold and takes no care,
That one, I say, stands little chance.
An end is made to your affair
Whene'er ye on the Gallows dance.

Envoi

Prince, those who lack great skill, I say,
And shrink before the Archers' lance,
Had best be off, they'll rue the day
Whene'er you on the Gallows dance.

Ballad VII.



TAke flight, Compan-
ions, seek the shade;
If ye are caught
ye'll not go free.
Each brother his
own plan has made;
The Cockle-shell won't stand the sea;
The Archer ne'er was Robber's friend,
And gaol birds sing a sad-tuned song;
Take heed or your own game will end,
Swung high—the Hangman's arm is long.

Some Brothers far too careless grew,
And left their bones upon the rack;
Their craft and all the tricks they knew
Serve not to bring their bodies back.
In bands ye may defy the lance,
And three to one is not far wrong;
Alone—'t is but to sooner dance,
Swung high—the Hangman's arm is long.

While ye are free, ye take no heed;
But always ye must have great care;
This counsel's all ye really need;
The prison's ever waiting there,
And ye must not yourselves expose,
Or to the Archers ye'll belong.
The culprit to the gallows goes,
Swung high—the Hangman's arm is long.

Envoi

Vivre, Saint David, Patron of the
Gallows Tree,
I ean, my friend, take care, bold
Robber that ye be;
Leave carefully alone the tempting
well-filled purse,
Lest soon ye may be caught or
suffer something worse,
On high, upon the gibbet, mocked
by all the throng,
Now at break of day—the
Hangman's arm is long.

Ballade I.



Parouart, la grant
mathe gaudie,
Où accollez sont
duppés et noirciz,
Et par angels suyvens
la paillardie,

Sont greffiz et prins cinq ou six,
Là sont beffleurs au plus hault bout assiz
Pour le hevaige et bien hault mis au vent.
Eschequez moy tost ces coffres massiz.
Car vendeurs des ances circoncis,
S'en brouent du tout à neant.
Eschec, eschec, pour le fardis!

Brouez moy sur ces gours passans,
Advisez moy bien tost le blanc,
Et pietonnez au large sur les champs.
Qu'au mariage ne soiez sur le banc
Plus qu'un sac de plastre n'est blanc.
Si gruppez estes des carieux,
Rebignez tost ces enterveux,
Et leur montrez des trois le bris:
Qu'enclaus ne soiez deux et deux.
Eschec, eschec, pour le fardis!

Plantez aux hurmes voz picons,
De paour des bisans si tres durs,
Et aussi d'estre sur les joncz,
Enmalez en coffre, en gros murs.
Escharicez, ne soiez durs,
Que le grand Can ne vous face essorer.
Songears ne soiez pour dorer,
Et babignez toujours aux ys
Des sires pour les desbouser.
Eschec, eschec, pour le fardis!

Envoi

Prince Froart, dit des Arques Petis,
L'un des sires si ne soit endormis,
Levez au bec que ne soiez greffiz.
Et que voz empz n'en ayent du pis,
Eschec, eschec, pour le fardis!

Ballade II.



Oquillars, ar-
vans à Ruel,
Menys vous chante
que gardez,
Que n'y laissez et
corps et pel,
Com fist Colin de l'Escailler.
Devant la roe à babiller.
Il babigna pour son salut.
Pas ne sçavoit oingnons peller,
Dont l'amboureux luy rompt le suc.

Changez et andossez souvent,
Et tirez vous tout droit au Temple,
Et eschequez tost, en brouant,
Qu'en la jarte ne soiez emple.
Montigny y fut, par exemple,
Bien attaché au hallegroup,
Et y jargonna-t-il le tremples,
Dont l'amboureux luy rompt le suc.

Gaillleurs, bien faitz en piperie,
Pour ruer les ninars au loing
A l'assault tost, sans suerie!
Que le mignon ne soit au gaing
Farci d'ung plumbis à coing
Qui griffe au gard le duc
Et de la dure si tres loing,
Dont l'amboureux luy rompt le suc.

Envoi

Prince, arriere de Ruel
Et n'eussiez vous denier ne pluc,
Qu'au giffle ne laissez la pel
Pour l'amboureux qui rompt le suc.

Ballade III.



Pelicans
Qui en tous temps
Avancez dedens
le pogois
Gourde piarde
Et sur la tarde

Desbousez les povres nyais,
Et pour soustenir voz pois,
Les duppes sont privez de caire,
Sans faire haire
Ne hault braire,
Mais planter ilz sont comme joncs
Par les sires qui sont si longs.

Souvent aux arque
A leur marques
Se laissent tous jours desbouser
Pour ruer
Et enterver
Pour leur contre, que lors faisons
La fee aux arque respons
Et ruez deux coups ou trois
Aux gallois.
Deux ou trois

Nineront trestout aux frontz
Pour les sires qui sont si longs.

Et pour ce, benardz,
Coquillars,
Rebecquez vous de la montjoye
Qui desvoye
Vostre proye,
Et vous fera du tout brouer,
Par joncher et par enterver,
Qui est aux pigons bien cher
Pour rifler
Et placquer
Les angelz de mal tous rons
Pour les sires qui sont si long.

Envoi

De paour des hurmes
Et des grumes,
Rasurez voz en droguerie
Et faierie,
Et ne soiez plus sur les joncs
Pour les sires qui sont si longs.

Ballade IV.



Aupicquetz frouans
des gours arques.
Pour desbouser beaulx
sires dieux
Allez ailleurs planter
vos marques!

Benards, vous estes rouges gueux.
Berart s'en va chez les joncheux
Et babigne qu'il a plongis.
Mes freres, soiez embraieux
Et gardez les coffres massis.

Si gruppez estes desgrappez
De ces angels si graveliffes,
Incontinent manteaulx chappez,
Pour l'emboue ferez eclipses;
De vos farges serez besifles,
Tout debout et non pas assis.
Pour ce gardez d'estre griffes
Dedens ces gros coffres massis.

Niaiz, qui seront attrappez
Bien tost s'enbroueront au halle,
Plus n'y vault que tost ne happez
La bauldrouse de quatre talle.
Destirer fait la hirenalle,
Quand le gosier est assegis
Et si hurque la pirenalle
Au saillir des coffres massis.

Envoi

Prince des gayeux les sarpes
Voz contres ne soient greffiz.
Pour doubte de frouer aux arque,
Gardez vous des coffres massiz.

Ballade V.



Oncheurs, jonchans
en joncherie,
Rebignez bien
où joncherez ;
Qu'ostac n'embrou'
votre arerie
Où accollez sont voz ainsnez.
Poussez de la quille et brouez
Car tost vous seriez rouppieux
Eschec qu'accollez ne soiez
Par la poe du marieux.

Bendez vous contre la faerie
Quanques vous auront desbousez
N'estant à juc la rifflerie
Des angelz et leurs assosez.
Berard, se vous puist, renversez.
Se greffir laissez voz carrioux,
La dure bien tost n'en verrez,
Pour la poe du marieux.

Entervez à la floterie
Chantez leur trois, sans point songer.
Qu'en astez ne soie, en surie,
Blanchir voz cuirs et essurger.
Bignez la mathe, sans targer,
Que voz ans ne soient ruppieux.
Plantez ailleurs, contre, assieger
Pour la poe du marieux.

Envoi

Prince, benardz en esterie,
Querez couplans pour l'amboureux.
Et, autour de vos ys, luezie
Pour la poe du marieux.

Ballade VI.



Ontres de
la gaudisserie
Entervez toujours
blanc pour bis,
Et frappez, en
la hurterie,
Sur les beaux sires bas assis.
Ruez des feuilles cinq ou six
Et vous gardez bien de la roe
Qui aux sires plante du gris
En leur faisant faire la moe.

La giffle gardez de rurie
Que voz corps n'en aient du pis
Et que point, à la turterie,
En la hurme soiez assis.
Prenez du blanc, laissez du bis,
Ruez par les fondes la poe,
Car le bizac, à voir advis,
Fait aux beroars faire la moe.

Plantez donc de la mouargie
Puis ça, puis là, pour le hurtis
Et n'espargnez point la flogie
Des doulx dieux sur les patis.
Vos ens soiez assez hardis
Pour leur avancer la droe;
Mais soient bien memoradis,
Qu'on vous face faire la moe.

Envoi

Prince, qui n'a bauderie
Pour eschever de la soe,
Danger de grup en arderie
Fait aux sires faire la moe.

Ballade VII.



Rouez, benards,
eschecquez à la saulve,
Car escornez vous
estes à la roue.

Fourbe, joncheur, cha-
cun de vous se saulve.

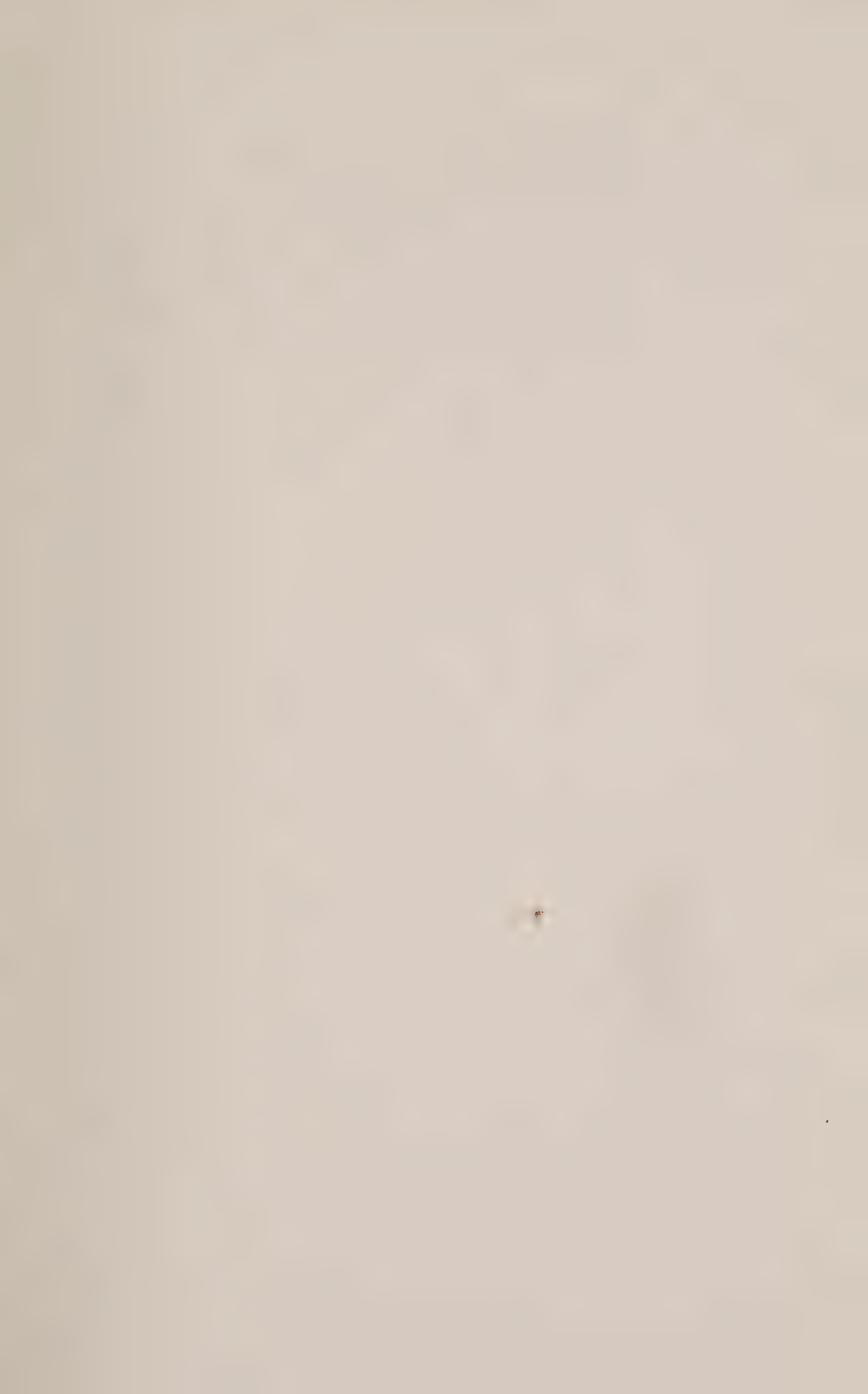
Eschec, eschec, coquille si s'en broue!
Cornette court nul planteur ne s'il joue.
Qui est en plant en ce coffre joyeulx,
Pour ces raisons, il a, ains qu'il s'escroue,
Jonc verdoiant, havre du marieux.

Maint coquillart, escorné de sa sauve,
Et desbousé de son ence ou sa poue,
Beau de bourdes, blandy de langue fauve,
Quide auront faire aux grimes la moue,
Pour quarre bien, affin qu'on ne le noe.
Couplez vous trois à ces beaulx sires dieux,
Ou vous aurez le ruffle en la joue,
Jonc verdoiant, havre du marieux.

Qui stat plain en gaudie ne se mauve.
Luez au bec que l'on ne vous encloue.
C'est mon advis, tout autre conseil sauve.
Car quoy! aucun de la faulx ne se loue.
La fin en est telle quanque deloue.
Car qui est grup, il a, mais c'est au mieulx
Par la vergne, tout au long de la voue
Jonc verdoiant, havre du marieux.

Envoi

Vive David! saint archquin la baboue,
I ehan mon amy, qui les feuilles desnoue.
L e vendengeur, befflour comme une choué,
Ling de son plain, de ses flos curieulx,
Noe beaucoup, dont il reçoit fressoue,
Jonc verdoiant, havre du marieux.



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